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SARAH ORNE JEWETT

It is a pity that Miss Jewett's tales are not better known in England. She, in her quiet fashion, has given a truer picture of the fundamental verities of American ideals than have some of our more notorious writers. And to-day, when so many of us are profoundly disturbed regarding the future of humanity, Miss Jewett's stories bring to the world a reassuring faith that man is both intelligent and trustworthy, that what was true in one corner of New England is true of mankind. It must be stated, at once, that she has little appeal to readers bent upon finding 'kinetic characters' and 'emphasis by direct action'. She was not circumscribed by the many rules which guide the present-day writer of short-stories. Her tales are disconcerting, tiresome to those whose logical powers are developed at the expense of their imagination and their love of romantic waywardness. The very lack of conspicuous 'efficiency' of method is one of her greatest charms, in this hour when the over-macadamized short-story sends the reader smoothly, swiftly, monotonously along, without a bump or a sight of grass-grown irregularity. Doubtless Miss Jewett's work might have been improved by more technique, but she had something better than formal skill,—wisdom, matured understanding of life, individual insight.

All of her stories are loosely woven narratives, picturing homely lives, yet she has so faithfully portrayed their strength, their tenderness, their response to primal duties, that she has lifted their existence to a high level of meaning. Her sea-captains, her fishermen, her housewives are like the persons in Sophoclean drama, deeply, ironically, aware of Fate. Their lives and their speech are shadowed by a consciousness of eternal truths. Only an artist, sensitive and meditative, endowed with the poet's vision, could have been content to suggest so quietly the meagre externals and the brooding inner life of these uninstructed, primitively real people. Herself a student of Wordsworth, she has given a Wordsworthian interpretation of austere, elemental feeling.

Inheritance and education developed Miss Jewett's consciousness of the meanings that press upon us as we ponder the ex-

istences of others. Never knowing the bondage of a conventional education, she had unusual opportunities to touch reality. Throughout her life she was, with various absences, a resident of South Berwick, Maine, where she was born September, 3, 1849, and where she died, June 24, 1909. She is typical of that older generation of American women who had the good fortune to be educated not by rote, but in a liberal fashion that developed personality. The daughter of a physician, portrayed in *A Country Doctor*, she took long drives with her adored father, jogging along the Maine roads which led through a pleasant region. South Berwick is still a quiet little village, on the bank of the Piscataqua River, which flows into the Atlantic ocean, twenty miles or so away from Berwick. This river, once the haunt of Indian tribes, is a very beautiful one; in its passage towards the sea it moves through dark pine woods and green meadows ashimmer with the light reflected from the water. The rolling country stretches out in open fields and pastures fenced with rambling walls made of the rounded glacial stones which are the one never-failing crop of northern New England fields. White farm-houses gleam out from their sheltering tall elms; the gardens are brilliant with rows of yellowing corn-stalks, stacked in files; pumpkins and squashes lie, tawny inert spheres upon the brown soil, and the fragrance of sunny autumn drifts along highways full of goldenrod and wild purple asters.

Here Miss Jewett became first acquainted with primal fears and hopes, toil and sorrow, in homes where birth, disease, death were the inevitable facts of life, and contentment was eternally on guard, waiting for grim nature's next move. The impressions gained at this time developed in Miss Jewett a profound respect for human courage and human kindliness. Women stricken with greatest anxiety could put aside grief, to speak gently to the young girl, showing her, unconsciously, the power of self-control and endurance developed by tragic experience.

At Berwick Academy, still remembered in that region for its high standards, she studied history, literature, and French. Visits to Boston, later journeys to Europe, and incessant reading gave her cosmopolitan breadth and taught her a right estimate of values. That delicate reticence about her own experiences, that freedom

from ornamental allusiveness to herself, has led some readers to think that Miss Jewett was a rustic genius, lacking *savoir-faire* in life and in art. In this connection it is interesting to note that she, a descendant of Huguenot stock, was proud of her French inheritance. Perhaps some of her gift as a story-teller was due to the French tradition of close observation and fidelity to significant detail. She kept pinned up on her old-fashioned 'secretary' two bits from Flaubert; one of these was: "*Écrire la vie ordinaire comme on écrit l'histoire*". Her collected *Letters* show how much she considered the problems of her profession, and how constantly she was studying the art of fiction.

As a describer of the shore life of the state of Maine she is without an equal. The clear austerity of the air of northern New England is everywhere in these tales set among rocky shores and gray islands. The stimulating tang of salt breezes and the cool breath from the illimitable east meet here; for those who know it she pictures the visionary beauty of the northland's clarity of light, its mysterious distances touched with receding shades of blue and dim green glimmering and fading into crystalline colorlessness. That expectant, hesitant quality of atmospheric tone, described by Dorothy Wordsworth in her journal of a *Tour Made in Scotland*, and by Fiona Macleod in *Where the Forest Murmurs*, was perceived by Miss Jewett, giving her work a certain elemental majesty of background. She describes life on the open sea, the daily experiences of fishermen whose journeys out to the deep waters demand courage, hardihood, endurance, association with primeval wind and water and stars. The sea is continual in her stories, determining the life of the people dwelling at its edge and earning their livelihood from it. The fishermen who seem so commonplace, so unassuming, so normal, are the very embodiment of the strength of man's will, of his delight in matching his powers with the mighty forces of the ocean. When these men come back to live in local and temporal villages, their existence, seemingly monotonous, is vibrating all the while to past and future.

Always against backgrounds of distance and whelming ocean and eternal struggle one must see the scenes of domestic life in the dingy little kitchens, furnished with braided rugs, native oil-

cloth, and, often, rare imported china, if one is to get the right perspective for understanding. It is in these scenes that Miss Jewett shows her gift of presenting character in mild action. The situations are simple, not at all striking in opportunities for dramatic interest. There is nothing spectacular nor very tense in her presentments of life; she shows people living simple, normal, average lives, and the tissue of their existence is not external event but slow pondering of life, and still slower exchange of comment about it.

Miss Jewett's stories are always stories of character. Plots hardly exist in her work; she had little interest in creating suspense or in weaving together threads of varied interests. She presents people through mild desultory action, in situations seldom dramatically striking. The people interpreted live simple, inconspicuous lives, without great tragedy attending them, but made significant through the little things which, by reiterated irritation and pain, tax the spirit of endurance and shape character. The wisdom won from slow pondering of life is found on the lips of her men and women. And these persons speak the very thoughts and the very language of their region; thoughts expressed in a shrewd, picturesque, colloquial fashion, in a dialect directly true to life, not a romantic make-believe. But the best part, perhaps, of her delineation of these people is in her record of their silences. Miss Jewett has interpreted the impulse to reticence, has accounted for the temperament of these watchful, guarded folk who imitate the granite impenetrability of their natural surroundings. Also she has shown the extraordinary sense of justice to be noted in this district. So bound up with nature are these people that they feel accountable for nature's doings; they must help atone for nature's ravages and aberrations. But like the ocean's ebb and flow, the method of giving aid and comfort is somewhat indirect, oblique, attaining its end with the seventh wave.

Miss Jewett's most successful and probably her most representative work is *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, a series of chapters linked together loosely enough by the fact that one person records her experiences in a typical Maine village, on the edge of the sea, a village that reaches back to the land overgrown with the spruce trees that, in sharp spires, stand out against the blue

sky. It is really a group of character-sketches, not a story, and the chief character is Mrs. Todd, a woman with a tragic past, fighting for her daily bread, yet brisk, hopeful, romantic to the last degree. Skilled in the lore of healing herbs, she seems like one of the Fates, endowed with portentous wisdom, stooping to pick sprigs of fragrant pennyroyal, in a sunshiny green pasture. Slowly, and with most delicate humor, Miss Jewett makes clear Mrs. Todd's endless curiosity, high-mindedness, and shrewd, inexhaustible kindness.

Another character is Captain Littlepage, whose experience on the deep waters of the Seven Seas has carried him into strange adventures. Many, in older days, were the men who had been around the world and had settled down in primitive seclusion to think over the scenes and events of a dramatic lifetime. This old man had a knowledge of foreign parts, his imagination was filled with brilliant pictures of the world; he was a thorough cosmopolitan, worldly-wise, efficient, yet an eternal child of mystery and romance; a mute, inglorious Marco Polo.

Joanna, in this story, was a young woman who, crossed in love, had gone to a lonely hermitage on a solitary island to spend her life, a combination of Ariadne and a mediæval anchoress. The book is sheer reality both in setting and in character-study. The scattered bits of description give one the very look of green pastures, the scent of aromatic herbs, the fragrance of sun-smitten spruce-trees, the sting of the cool salt air, and the milder aspects of blue, sunshiny, safe harbors.

All through the casual recital of unimportant incidents the reader finds a spirit of gentle, appreciative humor. There is satire here, of the most charming sort, never unkind, never malicious, never condescending, but always quietly penetrating. Miss Jewett saw well the ironies, the whimsies of life, she watched with sympathy the interplay of human emotions; she knew how vanity, selfishness, obstinacy, and complacent virtue fail to recognize themselves in the tragi-comedy of social life. Her pages are full of keen pleasant enjoyment of the caprices of personality, the self-secured defeats, the amusing ignorance that calls itself knowledge. This humor cannot be illustrated by quotation, it must be recognized in the context, and is always the unspoken reflection of one

silently pondering over the range of human life from the Age of Pericles to the day when the Bowden Family had a reunion.

Other stories have their individual charm, always preëminently the charm of character delineation. Mrs. Bonney in *Deephaven* is a tragic figure of Poverty, Labor, and Courtesy. *The White Heron* is a study of loyalty to Nature, a record of faithfulness to the wild, beautiful life which surrounds a little country girl. Repudiating money that would relieve her poverty, she keeps the White Heron's secret, sharing the bird's mysterious, lonely freedom, and remaining true to the primitive brotherhood between man and winged creature.

The Neighbor's Landmark, in the same volume, encloses in itself a picture of another sort of loyalty to Nature and tradition. This concerns a man's balancing of beauty, association, sentiment, over against a profit which would greatly ease the struggle of an impoverished family. In these two stories are presented moral problems of absorbing interest to those who resent man's useless despoiling of the beauty of the natural world.

The Queen's Twin is a very subtly humorous study of a New England woman gravely concerned about the inner fortunes of her twin (by chronology), Queen Victoria. Here is a recognition of the fact that circumstances are accidental, that character, ideals, inward dignity are the realities of life. A sort of democracy of inner understanding and sympathy is pictured in this suggestive story of the bare, unlovely surroundings of one whose imagination carried her beyond space and courtiers.

Dozens of other stories, collected in various volumes, exist, and several more extended works make up the list of Miss Jewett's achievement. These stories have varying degrees of appeal. Some are frankly trivial, others are interpretations of the human 'predicament' where decisions must be made which involve surrender of personal desires, for the sake of some faith in the larger values of life. Through her record of interminable endurance, courageous patience, Miss Jewett has shown that in all the fluctuations of selfishness, something exists more stable than self, some sense of the coercion exercised by ideals, some knowledge of the superiority of will over matter. A reader once attracted will wander on through these tales with increasing responsive-

ness. She arouses the reader to reflection, stimulates his curiosity, defies his conventionality and modernness, contributes to his faith in the worth of experience. The rugged and picturesque life of hardship is always a tonic to the jaded products of urbanity.

MARTHA HALE SHACKFORD.

Wellesley College.

NOVEMBER FROST

Austerity of autumn evenings!

The sunset in the stubble is aglow;

There is no wind beneath, but, deep and slow,

The pines are stirring with vague murmurings:

They hear the beating of far northern wings,

And brace them 'gainst the unseen, hurrying foe:

Soon we shall hear them laboring in the snow,

And groaning in the dark as the storm sings.

My restlessness is passing; I descry

The calmer passion of the eternal world,

The mother-kindness of the pearl-grey sky.

My changeful thoughts were with the dry leaves whirled;

But all their intricate desires are lost

Beneath the fierceness of the unyielding frost.

ISABEL WESTCOTT HARPER.

Smith College.